Literature Review: The Role of Moral Outrage in Coordinating Collective Action on Social Media

By Hongkang Xu
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Abstract

This paper offers a review on the literature on moral outrage's role in coordinating both effective and ineffective collective action online via clustered social networks on social media. The first few sections provide a brief overview of the existing literature on moral outrage, its relation to collective identity, types of collective action and how social media affects both cognitive processes. The last part discusses recent case studies on the observed effects of moral outrage in modern digital age online activism scenarios. At the end of this paper, the author offers a set of recommendations for potential policy interventions to curb undesirable influences of moral outrage on online activism and promote preferred outcomes.

Introduction

In the recent years there has been much academic interest in how social media affects collective action (i.e., coordinated activities based on similar patterns of technology use performed by a collective in the pursuit of a common goal, George and Leidner, 2019) in the modern digital age. Similarly, the topic of moral outrage on social media has been increasingly more popular with researchers, especially while observing the growing engagement of social networks platforms in individuals' everyday lives. Former research on moral outrage and collective identity suggests that moral outrage plays a sophisticated role in the organization of collective action. Contemporary studies on real world cases of online activism opens up the opportunity to examine these relations and effects in a modern context, where many social movements emerge and bloom on the internet.

This paper will start with a review of background literature on outrage and moral outrage, as well as its relationship with collective identity. Early research on Relative Deprivation Theory and Resource Mobilization Theory inspires and shapes current understanding of moral outrage as an emotional response and how it galvanizes collective action. The next section will discuss the differences between current online activism and traditional offline activism. The literature will also look at moral outrage research in the digital age, examining and proposing changes in this dynamic. The final section discusses recent case studies on the observed effects of moral outrage in modern digital age online activism scenarios to further build on this conclusion. At the end of this paper, the author offers a set of recommendations for potential policy interventions to curb undesirable influences of moral outrage on online activism and promote preferred outcomes.

1. Outrage, Moral Outrage and Collective Identity

Revolutions are often described as social movements with a particular struggle for people's "hearts and minds", in which injustice plays an important role (Martin, 1983). Such discussions

usually put great emphasis on claiming or asserting that unless the disadvantaged feel morally outraged about their unjust treatment, rebellious forms of collective behavior will not occur (e.g., Aristotle, 1962; Brickman, Folger, Goode, & Schul, 1981; Fanon, 1963; Moore, 1978). Thus, it's demonstrated that the origin of moral outrage stems from social activism and collective action.

Fundamentally speaking, Moral Outrage is an intense negative emotion combining anger and disgust triggered by a perception that someone violated a moral norm (Salerno et al., 2013).

Considering the social effects of Moral Outrage, Goodenough (1997) defined Moral Outrage as "a response to infringements or transgressions on what people perceive to be the immunities, they, or others with whom they identify, can expect based on their rights and privileges and what they understand to be their reasonable expectations regarding the behavior of others".

However, more recent definitions focus more on its social significance as an emotional response in relation to collective behavior, such as the definition for outrage: "Outrage is characterized by anger directed at the perceived third-party perpetrator and is felt on behalf of those unjustly harmed" (Haidt, 2003; Hoffman, 2000; Leach, Snider, & Iyer, 2002; Montada & Schneider, 1989; Vidmar, 2000). Thus, Thomas et al (2009) established that Moral Outrage is an "other-focused emotional response that can be evoked by the perception that a third-party outgroup has perpetrated illegitimate harm against another outgroup".

Early work on Moral Outrage stemmed from Relative Deprivation Theory and Resource Mobilization Theory. Relative Deprivation Theory elaborates the moral outrage explanation for collective action by stating that the inequality in distribution of outcomes causes feelings of deprivation (moral outrage), which raises individual willingness to engage in collective behavior (Martin et al., 1983). This theory was criticized for many reasons, the most significant being that relevant studies have found a direct association between outcomes and collective behavior without measuring feelings of deprivation (Martin et al., 1983).

Martin et al. also outlined that general and egoistic measures of deprivation have generally failed to predict collective behavior, although exceptions have been found (Crawford & Naditch, 1970).

Thus, future research focused more on the Resource Mobilization Theory of collective action, deemed "the pragmatic explanation" by many researchers. This theory argues that the disadvantaged will engage in collective action only if they believe they have enough resources for mobilization (Martin et al., 1984). The theory directed research on collective action towards another concept, "Perceived Readiness" in the field, away from moral outrage.

Later studies on structural equation modeling showed that instrumental social support affected the group efficacy pathway (reflecting problem-focused coping), while procedural fairness and emotional social support affected the group-based anger pathway (reflecting emotion-focused coping), forming 2 distinct pathways to collective action tendencies (Van Zomeren, 2004). This hinted that moral outrage in Relative Deprivation Theory did contribute to collective action, but via one of two pathways.

In another study with a similar anger-efficacy split, norms about outrage and efficacy were associated with an opinion-based group identity (Bliuc et al., 2007). Via group-based interaction, results showed priming group members with an injunctive outrage norm boosted commitment to action.

2. Retributive Actions vs Reparative Actions

Research on Moral Outrage and Collective Action picked up again when the types of collective action were examined. Moral Outrage seems to be the explanation for retributive actions, while another response, collective guilt, seems to be the explanation for reparative actions.

Moral outrage as an emotional response reflects an underlying concern with justice for the disadvantaged as stated in Relative Deprivation Theory (Rothschild, 2013). However, they suggest, for members of advantaged groups, outrage at a third parties for illegitimately harming a disadvantaged group may rather be driven by feelings of collective guilt.

Via an experiment, Rothschild et al. manipulated the claimed cause of working-class Americans' suffering and altered whether a potential scapegoat target was portrayed as a viable or nonviable alternative source of this harm. Participants who were primed with ingroup culpability for working-class harm reported increased support, following moral outrage for retributive actions toward immigrants portrayed as a viable source of that harm, but reported similarly increased support, this time following collective guilt for reparative action when immigrants were portrayed as a nonviable source of that harm.

3. Moral Outrage on Social Media

Recent theorizing suggests that the design of social media platforms amplifies moral outrage by lowering the social costs associated with outrage and increasing its personal benefits, especially when moral content interacts with moral sensitivities to shape exposure to social media and subsequent behavior (Crockett, 2017). She claims that while offline, the expression of moral outrage usually spreads through communication channels such as gossip, shaming and punishment and there is a risk of retaliation, but it is a lot easier to shame others online to sound virtuous and morally correct. Thus, moral outrage sparked by messages on social media and the internet more broadly is likely a crucial factor in explaining recent alarming trends in societal discourse and their consequences for increasing polarization and the decay of democratic norms (Carpenter et al., 2021).

Carpenter et al. (2021) identified three specific types of socially negative behaviors that moral outrage facilitates: aggression (behavior intended to harm others), sophistry (poor argumentation), and withdrawal (avoiding discussions of politics). They described psychological mechanisms through which moral outrage can lead to these outcomes, specifically focusing on dehumanization and group antagonism.

On the other hand, some researchers such as Spring, Cameron and Cikara (2018) hold the view that digital moral outrage enables the sharing of specialized knowledge on social media and can lead to increased organized collective action and participation in the public sphere.

Brady and Crockett (2019), while acknowledging the mobilization effects of digital moral outrage, argue that the disadvantages still outweigh the benefits as online outrage could divert collective action toward issues that are immediately compelling but ultimately ineffective and counterproductive (Brady & Crockett, 2019).

4. Online Activism vs Offline Activism

Since the emergence of Online Social Network Platforms (Social Media), researchers have argued that collective action online is vastly different from the processes observed offline.

Greijdanus et al. (2020) outlined three ways social media facilitated online activism. First, they allow individuals to share opinions and experiences, which rally individuals under collective causes (Bogen et al., 2019; Mendes, 2018). Second, they provide online communities with ways to gather in clustered networks and provide support (Rudolfsdottir et al., 2018). Third, Social Media allows communities to update and spread influence (Turley & Fisher, 2018). By relating individuals to common causes, organizing active communities, and negotiating shared realities with outsiders, social media is an ideal breeding ground for activism.

Early research described online activism as “clicktivism” or “slacktivism”. Collective action online via social media was considered a less effortful and productive alternative to offline activism (Halupka, 2018). However, both the replacement effect and the “one-upping” effect was disproven by later researchers (Greijdanus et al., 2020).

Both Crockett and Greijdanus et al. identified inconsistent relations between social media and collective action. Among these relations, were effects such as digital divides, echo chambers, spiral of silence and digital dualism. Digital divides signify a difference in the demographics of people who engage online and offline. Spiral of silence refers to the tendency of people to self-censor unpopular opinions. The echo chamber effect is a common feature of social networks where similar shared realities are echoed and socially validated. Digital Dualism suggests that individuals may enact different personae online compared to offline.

Looking at the combined effect of online and offline activism opportunities, researchers also found that online activism may embolden and motivate individuals to participate in offline activism, while it can also tighten intrapersonal concurrence between activism communities both online and offline. Thus, we must reconsider how moral outrage coordinates collective action given a modern digital setting on social media.

5. Recent Case Studies and Proposed Effects

After examining current literature on moral outrage, collective action, as well as the hypothesized effects of social media on both subjects, it is proposed that:

- Relative Deprivation Theory still applies to collective action on social media

- The effects of moral outrage on collective action, specifically retributive actions, are amplified by social media with increased instability due to inconsistent relations between online and offline activism
- Group-based anger pathways are more sophisticated and more intertwined with group-efficacy pathways

a. Relative Deprivation Theory Still Applies to Collective Action on Social Media

Relative Deprivation Theory elaborates the moral outrage explanation for collective action by stating that the inequality in distribution of outcomes causes feelings of deprivation (moral outrage), which raises individual willingness to engage in collective behavior (Martin et al., 1984). Relative Deprivation Theory is the basis for current research on the role of moral outrage in coordinating collective action. Previous inspection of the origin of moral outrage and its definitions shows that moral outrage is closely related to social perception of inequality, and the involvement of advantage and disadvantaged groups. This phenomenon does not change when online activism is examined.

Workneh et al. (2021) investigates the role of social media platforms in mobilizing Ethiopians toward political reform during the protest and post-protest periods demarcated by the ascent of Abiy Ahmed as the new Prime Minister of Ethiopia. During protest and post-protest periods, Workneh observed instances of outrage communication on social media, including inflammatory expressions, blocks, reports, bans, hate speech, and political extremism. They claim that the major cause of moral outrage on Ethiopian Social Media was the dissatisfaction of government ethnic minority policies, specifically the inequality of ethnic group treatment and representation.

Small et al. (2020) focuses on a media controversy in 2011 regarding the slaughter of beef cattle in Indonesian abattoirs and the subsequent banning of live cattle exports to Indonesia by Australia. Australian activists on social media demanded that the cattle trade be halted over footage showing steers being “whipped, beaten and slashed repeatedly, and suffering terrible pain before they are slaughtered”. Moral outrage amongst the general public was a result of inequality of animal treatment and resulted in a nearly year-long ban of cattle exports to Indonesia.

Sharma (2022) examines the intersection of group-based expressions including digital moral outrage, collective guilt, and collective action on Twitter, following the tragic incident of 8 May 2020, in which 16 migrant workers were run over by a train after the Indian government imposed a sudden COVID-19-related lockdown. During this incident, public outrage was ignited by the inequality of treatment towards domestic migrant workers and resulted in widespread protest.

However, this study also argues that especially on social media, collective action is not a necessary outcome but a desirable outcome. Many previous studies show that people might experience moral outrage based on perceived inequality, but not do anything, highlighting a difference between collective action and collective behavior (Linewebber et al., 2015; Martin, Brickman & Murray, 1984). This does not disprove Relative Deprivation Theory, but rather

suggests that there is a certain threshold to which collective action is taken as a result of moral outrage.

b. The Effects of Moral Outrage on Collective Action, Specifically Retributive Actions, are Amplified by Social Media with Decreased Predictability due to Inconsistent Relations

It is hypothesized that social media amplifies the effects of moral outrage on collective actions, through echo chambers, digital divide (the involvement of more technologically savvy demographics), digital dualism, anonymity, intrapersonal emboldening, and interpersonal mobilization. All of these features of digital outrage communication and online activism are recognized by both sides of the "moral outrage on social media" debate. Due to the same reasons, whether the effects are positive or negative is increasingly unpredictable.

Workneh's (2021) case study into political reform in Ethiopia highlights collective action outcomes as proactive behavior to share and spread tweets regarding political reform. Only less than 5% of the sample population admitted to sharing these tweets, showing generally undesirable results. Workneh alludes this to the lack of interest in participation on social media amongst scholars, students, and scientists claiming that social media platforms such as Facebook have "an inability to foster a national framework of shared citizenship". This may be considered a form of Digital Divide where a certain demographic makes a conscious decision to avoid digital participation. Moreover, in online communities without professional fact checking, misinformation may spread like wildfire due to the echo chamber effect, further worsening the situation. Although the general public mostly agreed on the existential benefits of social media on society, 80% also shared around concern regarding 4 major issues about the current social media landscape, being incitement of violence, hate speech, political polarization, and misinformation. Here Workneh references Crockett's (2019) literature on hate actors and how anonymity exacerbates their interaction and presence. Thus, it can be concluded that the overall effect in terms of collective action is insignificant and extremely undesirable, due to the effects of Digital Divide, Echo Chambers and Anonymity.

In the case of the Indonesian Cattle Export Controversy, Small et al. (2020) found that social media interacted with traditional media to elevate issues that triggered moral outrage and attempted to influence the government into implementing specific policy actions. They found that social media mainly played the role of narrowing the range of views individuals were exposed towards due to an Echo Chamber effect. Rather than operating in isolation, social media also operated alongside traditional broadcasting media to amplify the effects on moral outrage. The current study demonstrated the capacity of the traditional media to infame public outrage and how its associated interaction with social media has introduced a wider range of actors, some marginal and even covert, into the shaping of the political agenda. Here, intrapersonal effects occurred to embolden online users to engage in offline activism. Interpersonal effects also occurred to sustain active support online to the offline movement, pulling in new users in the process. Such effects align with the works of Spring et al. (2019) which claim that moral outrage promotes effective mobilization. This is a good example of how online and offline activism may work together, and how the effects of intrapersonal concurrence and interpersonal motivation help facilitate desirable collective action (moderate and effective).

When it comes to the study of the Indian Lockdown Migrant Workers incident, results were mixed. On one hand, survey results showed less than 16% percent support for anti-migrant tweets, while most opposition tweets took on the less extreme position of supporting the government. Thus, results did not show significant political polarization, hate speech or radicalism. On the other hand, Sharma (2022) argued that collective action was lack-luster. They agreed with Crockett (2017) that online platforms give the convenience of expressing moral outrage without having to deal with any offline confrontation, in this case, it provided support for the theory of "slacktivism". Small argued pointed out that many social media users tagged President Modi online to express their outrage, but few offline movements followed (the authors later highlighted that during covid lockdown, the opportunities for such gatherings were sparse). What's more, tweeters expressed moral outrage and anger towards 6 different targets, including different sectors of the central government. This approach failed to amount serious pressure to push policy reform. Such mixed results show that specific geopolitical, socioeconomical and temporal settings have a large influence on the overall effect of digital moral outrage on coordinating collective action.

c. Group-Based Anger Pathways are More Sophisticated and More Intertwined with Group-Efficacy Pathways

Group-Efficacy Pathways refer to problem-focused coping via instrumental social support, while Group-Based Anger Pathways refer to emotion-focused coping via perceived emotional social support. Both of these pathways promote collective action tendencies. As introduced previously, emotional social support can be attributed to moral outrage and collective guilt, while instrumental social support is carried out by government policies and individual analysis.

Evidence for more intertwined, or increased interaction between the two pathways is illustrated in Workneh's (2021) case study. Throughout extensive sit-down interviews, Workneh inferred from academicians and social thinkers that their stake in the transaction of ideas and debates seemed minimal due to the negative perception of social networks systems such as Facebook as 'chaotic' and 'irrational.' They believed that sharing their opinions might not matter and would not "solve the problem". This is similar to the spiral of silence effect, which aligns with Crockett's (2017) observation that the ease of expression of moral outrage on digital platforms presented the risk of amplification of dominant voices where the non-dominant voices can be easily silenced. Moreover, low perceived "group efficacy" shut down both pathways amongst social thinkers and inhibited collective action tendencies.

Conclusion

We have reviewed digital moral outrage and its relations with online and offline collective action. To recap, contemporary research on moral outrage stems from Relative Deprivation Theory and Resource Mobilization Theory. The modern definition of moral outrage indicates a clear association with the inequality of outcomes and involves strong negative emotional responses to third party actions. Moral outrage and collective guilt stimulate different collective actions, namely retributive action, and reparative action. Current state of research on digital moral outrage is torn between the argument that it has the tendency to elicit political polarization,

and the argument that it promotes mobilization of resources. Via examining three very recent case studies, we've concluded the three major characteristics of digital moral outrage's role in coordinating collective action. These are: Relative Distributive Theory still applies to collective action on social media; The effects of moral outrage on collective action, specifically retributive actions, are amplified by social media with increased instability due to inconsistent relations between online and offline activism; Group-based anger pathways are more sophisticated and more intertwined with group-efficacy pathways.

Together, these findings suggest valuable avenues for future research. More research is needed on understudied phenomena such as the interaction of group-focused pathways on Social Media. Moral Outrage's effect on collective action evolves through time, sometimes reaching a stage known as "Digital Outrage Fatigue" on social media. Existing research suggests strongly adverse effects (Crockett, 2017) throughout this period of time, which is critical towards understanding the complete timeline of digital moral outrage's influences.

In terms of policy-wise implications, this study aims to emphasize the unstable nature of digital moral outrage and collective action. Government policies should first aim at reducing radicalism, most importantly the four major concerns: Incitement of violence, hate speech, political polarization, and misinformation. Policy makers should also try to tackle inherent issues on Social Media, such as the spiral of silence and echo chambers, to involve all demographics into the conversation. When confronting multiple social movement objectives, government policy should direct public attention on the most pressing issues, while organizing subsequent actions into a timeline to combat potential moral fatigue.

In conclusion, the current state of literature has extensively explored the origins of moral outrage and its effects on offline collective action, specifically retributive actions. Social media amplifies this relationship, but also has mixed inconsistent impacts on both processes. Recent case studies provide compelling evidence for Relative Distributive Theory, amplifying effects with decreased predictability, and increased interactions between group-based pathways for digital moral outrage on collective action. This gives social media a great deal of vibrancy, unpredictability, and pluralism, but also motivates government policy in decreasing radicalization and optimizing the channel of communication, including politicization, representation, debate, mobilization and reform.

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